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## Are You Transformed Yet?: Yearning For Change Through Reflection

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## **Are You Transformed Yet?: Yearning For Change Through Reflection**

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### **Abstract**

Over a ten week period, two early childhood teacher educators purposefully tried to transform their students' thinking toward a more critical stance about the at risk discourse. By posing weekly questions to a cohort of early childhood preservice teachers participating in a mentoring program for at risk children, this inquiry into reflective practice sought to find out if intervention by teacher educators would affect a shift in preservice teachers' understanding of what it means to be placed at risk. Through a two stage reading of their reflections written in response to each question, the authors illuminate the personal and cultural assumptions held by these future teachers. Although this study confirms research that suggests that a single intervention will probably not result in substantial changes in preservice teachers' worldview, there was encouraging evidence that transformations might occur if the process became an ongoing one.

### **Introduction**

As partial fulfillment of a field experience requirement during the early childhood teacher education program in a college situated in a rural section of West Georgia, our preservice teachers visit a local elementary school to act as mentors to "at risk" students. This field experience component, named STARS, an acronym for student teachers serving at risk students, requires our preservice teachers to email a reflection to us each week that describes their visit with their assigned child. Reasoning that through reflective writing preservice teachers will enhance their practice by gaining a better understanding of children and of themselves; we sought evidence that our students were making such transformations (Schon, 1983, 1987). Yet, as we poured over their reflections each semester it became apparent that our students were not prepared with a method of critique that could help capture the complexity of the problem (McLaren, 1998; Johnson, 2001). As Campoy (2000) notes, because transformations are unlikely to occur without the intervention of the teacher educator, we began to structure the STAR reflections with a framework of weekly questions for our preservice teachers to reflect upon. By asking the preservice teachers to think about their mentoring in terms of cultural and ideological assumptions, our framework served as a rubric intended to interrogate the practice of placing particular children "at risk". Through the creation of a scaffolded framework of questions, one that would encourage a shift from personal interpretations towards a more theoretically based understanding of phenomena, we hoped to achieve some level of transformation in our students' thinking (Johnson, 2001). Although we began this project with transformation as our goal, we were mindful of Johnson's (2001) research which suggests that a single intervention will most likely not result in substantial changes.

Through our questions, we hoped that our early childhood preservice educators would begin to unbraid the underlying assumptions that limit the range of possibilities for addressing children who have been placed at risk (Cannella, 1997, 1998). By raising our students' consciousness to particular oppressive social practices embedded in the at-risk discourse, these preservice teachers would begin to change the way in which they viewed the at-risk child. (Freire, 2002).

Fine's (1995) observation that the dominant at risk discourse "keeps us from being broadly, radically, and structurally creative about transforming schools and social conditions" (p. 91) gave us a starting point from which we could begin to discuss how power operates. Our questions were formulated to expose what is taken for granted in the at risk discourse and how dominant power hides or ignores alternative approaches. By exposing what is excluded in the discourse, and what is devalued, we hoped that contradictions and ambiguities within social practices would be illuminated (Cherryholmes, 1988). We also wanted to find out how our students interpret social practices, how they think and act, and to what extent have historical discourses shaped their thoughts (Cherryholmes, 1988).

### **A Two Staged Reading of the Reflective Journals**

The work of Cherryholmes (1988) gave us direction for how to go about interacting with our students during the process. First "be open to critical discourse when 'normal' discourse becomes problematic" (p. 172); second, "teachers share the norms of the discourse with their students" (p. 172); third, "students should be discouraged from reifying and objectifying texts and discursive practices"; fourth, "teach students how to make and evaluate arguments knowing that there is not a 'best' argument or position" (p.172). For early childhood teacher educators it is incumbent upon us to share our thoughts that categorical thinking are only convenient ways in which to describe an abstraction or guide practice. This means that we tried to refrain from authorizing any categories, taxonomies or practices as being objective references or proclaiming anything as a universal truth. What we wanted them learn was that categories are always constructed in the context of a particular discourse (Slattery, 1995).

Freire (1998) deeply believed that "teacher preparation should never be reduced to a form of training" (p. 23). This is why he suggested that instead of training, teacher education should rely on reflection because "reflection is an occasion for the student's intervention in examining and changing life." (p. 9). Given that teachers are actors on the social and political stage (Johnson, 2001), preservice teachers can be prepared for this role through a journaling process that asks them to reflect critically about structural practices extant in teaching practice. Not only do reflective journals increase the prospects that preservice teachers will begin to think more critically about teaching practice, they also create pathways toward understanding their own feelings, actions and intentions (Johnson, 2001).

Campoy (2000) offers a guide to reflective journaling that begins with the premise that, for transformative change to occur, the teacher educator must intervene to help the

preservice teacher develop good reflective skills. As a way to facilitate the transformational process, she suggests that teacher educators use questions and vignettes in an increasing complex rubric (scaffolding) as a framework. Theorizing that reflective language is transparent, therefore serving as a gateway to deeper understanding about oneself, Johnson (2001), finds reflective journals to be an effective qualitative tool for research if the approach encourages a change in the preservice teacher's thinking. Johnson (2001) explains that when most preservice teachers begin their teacher preparation they embrace a liberal humanist view of teaching, one that they believe is apolitical and morally unassailable. Agreeing with Campoy (2000), Johnson's (2001) view is that most preservice teachers will not question in depth their assumptions about teaching without encouragement from the teacher educator.

For teacher educators to see a transformation in a preservice teacher's world view, Johnson (2001) suggests that the narratives be analyzed in two stages. After a first reading, stage one analyzes the narrative in terms of the preservice teacher's personal voice. Once the narrative is framed in this way, the teacher educator re-reads the narrative in stage two to look for the preservice teacher's cultural and ideological assumptions (Johnson, 2001).

### **About Our Students**

Before beginning the discussion, we believe it is important to describe our students for you. Our college is a small, private liberal arts oriented institution located in a rural county an hour drive from a large southeastern city. Most of the students are either local to the college or come from the suburbs surrounding the city. Out of the 1000 students who attend the college, less than five percent are minorities, a stark contrast to the community where close to fifty percent of the population is of African American heritage.

Out of the thirty participating early childhood education majors, nine were in their junior year and twenty-one were classified as seniors. With the exception of one white male, all were white females and every student identified themselves either as middle or upper middle class.

### **Findings**

Over a ten week period, we posed a weekly email question to our students that required an electronic response back to us after they met with their STAR student that week. After their responses were received, we read each one twice. The first reading sought evidence of their personal voice, while the second reading's purpose was to reveal their cultural and ideological assumptions.

As suggested in Johnson (2001) and Campoy's (2000) work, reflective journals were the catalysts for this research project with preservice teachers and their work with the STAR students. Each preservice teacher was assigned a STAR student to work with for a semester. Requirements included spending one hour per week with an assigned

student, submitting a weekly reflection in response to teacher educator questions, and attending an initial meeting with the school principal and teacher educators.

What we created was, in effect, a semester long interview that asked the interviewee to reflect upon mostly closed-ended questions. Our choice of method posed some particular problems that we must address at this point. We were purposefully trying to transform our student's thinking toward a more critical stance. While our conscious intentions yearn for a desired outcome, our unknown intentions and desires surely affected the formulation of the questions and the interpretation of the responses (Scheurich, 2001). Scheurich (2001) says that the same is true of the interviewee, "The language out of which the questions are constructed is not bounded or stable; it is persistently slippery, unstable and ambiguous from person to person, from situation to situation, from time to time... What a question or answer means to the researcher can easily mean something different to the interviewee" (p. 62.).

Because we concur with Schuerich's (2001) assertion that data analysis never represents the reality of the interviewee, the discussion is solely our interpretation of what we as researchers experienced at a particular moment in time. If there is any representation, it is the representation of our own value judgments and interpretative bias. Another slippery slope which we found ourselves on was the unequal power relationships between professors, as interviewers, and the personally identifiable students, as interviewees. This power imbalance manifested itself in the responses in the form of dominance and resistance (Scheurich, 2001). Because our students know us well, we became aware that there were a few who responded in a way that would please us and there were others who, we believe, resisted our intentions by answering in such a way to displease us. Scheurich (2001) points out that, "Interviewees do not simply go along with the researcher's program, even if it is a structured rather than open one. Interviewees carve out their own space, they can control part of the interview. They push and resist questions, resist goals of the researcher... interviewees are not passive subjects; they are active participants in the interaction. They often use the interviewer as much as the interviewer is using them. (p. 71). Although we present evidence of dominance and resistance, we also tried to capture what Scheurich (2001) calls chaos/freedom, the language that cannot be contained in the dominance-resistance binary. How to go about illuminating instances of dominance-resistance binary and chaos-freedom was perhaps our most challenging task. We had to decide what language to interpret, what language to stand alone without any analysis and what, among a voluminous amount of data, to leave out.

### **Week One - What does an at-risk child look like?**

The first week's question was an anticipatory one the preservice teachers answered before they met their STAR student. It required thoughts on STAR students' age, gender, ethnicity, language, race and economic status as well as academic status.

We phrased the first question in this way:

*Imagine the child who will be your STAR student this semester. Imagine what characteristics your child has in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, language, race and economic status. Can you imagine what sort of house your child lives in? Who might be living with your students such as parents, guardians, siblings? How do you think your child is doing academically? How will your child be dressed? What else do you anticipate about your child?*

From this first question, we hoped to discover evidence that our students had knowledge of the dominant discourse's message that certain types of students, specifically poor children of color and non-English speaking students, were the most likely to be at-risk. Although many responses confirmed our hypothesis that our students perceived these characteristics as disadvantages, we were, at the same time, surprised to find that some students had a different take on what at-risk meant. As the preservice teachers shared preconceived notions as well as expectations and goals during the first week, it was not difficult to detect personal voices in their comments parsed from our students' reflections.

Typical of many of the first week responses was one such as this, "It does not matter to me what color my student is, it only matters that I can be a friend to her and help her further her education. We are here to help these children, not judge them. It does not matter to me what she looks like, or smells like; the only concern that I have is that I help her in whatever area that I can."

On a personal level, this preservice teacher truly wants to make a difference in the life of her child. Most of the preservice teachers seemed to be committed to working diligently with their students and making a difference in their lives. Yet, this response confirms our hypothesis that these children are typically non-white and poorly parented. From a cultural standpoint, this preservice teacher is clearly Othering her anticipated student. We detected Othering in many responses as well, telling us that our students felt these children were somehow very different than themselves.

Another example generalizing about the child's racial and socioeconomic characteristics is evident in this reflection:

*My child will more than likely be an African American boy from a middle to lower class family. He probably lives with one parent or another family member. Hopefully his academic success and willingness to learn will get better with time. I will be there to guide him in the right direction and give him support that maybe no one has ever given him. I am excited about working with my student.*

Many of the preservice teachers' reflections seem to indicate an expectation of being assigned boys rather than girls and African-American students rather than Caucasian ones. Their reflections also indicated expectations of low-income students who are struggling academically.

Next, two preservice teachers' reflections shed light on how one's given name can affect the perception of race and ethnicity:

*I imagine that my student will be a shy little girl who is white, because most African Americans and Spanish people have names that relate to their culture*

And-

*I imagine that my student is a Hispanic girl who comes from a poor family where the father works and the mother stays home, since this is traditional in many Spanish cultures. The parents probably do not speak much English and feel isolated from the school environment their child is in. I imagine the parents rent a house or apartment and probably live with or near an extended family in the area. My child will probably not be doing as well academically as her peers due to lack of command of the English language.*

From these comments, it appears that the preservice teachers have many preconceived notions about their STAR students, and that many of their ideas are culturally based. Some of their thoughts could be influenced by anecdotal sources or from reading research about at-risk children while others are strictly from their own cultural backgrounds. It is noteworthy to point out that many of the preservice teachers expected their child to be academically challenged as well as living in single parent homes in lower-income housing.

### **Week Two - Helping the "Others"**

Lisa Delpit (1995) made the observation that preservice teachers are taught how to diagnose and remediate deficiencies through descriptions of failure. Rather than build upon a models of success, preservice teachers are bombarded with labels such as "disadvantaged, at-risk, learning disabled and underclass" (Delpit, p. 178). Delpit (1995) indicts those teacher education courses that promote an Othering of children as a big part of the problem. Too often, courses in diversity and multiculturalism prescribe how to tolerate different or other kinds of people. Tolerance is a coded word that on its surface appears to be a noble objective, yet when deconstructed it comes to mean 'put up with these Others until they can be properly assimilated into the mainstream culture' kind of mindset. What we wanted to accomplish through this second question was to promote thinking that would move our students away from a notion of tolerance toward one of celebration. As Delpit (1995) urges, preservice teachers must learn the brilliance children bring with them because of their culture

On week two, we posed the following question:

*Although you may know about research that describes the relationships between race, poverty and academic achievement, how do you feel that you as a teacher will have success overcoming these obstacles? Do you think it will be hard to accept some cultures' ways of living?*

One instance of Othering in the preservice teachers' personal voices was evident in this reflection:

*I think it is hard for some people to consider how others are brought up if they have never been around their lifestyles. I went to a private school and the town that I live in is still segregated so I did not know the everyday lifestyles of how others live.*

Although public schools are officially desegregated in this region of the south, some whites have created private academies to keep the races apart. What's more, almost all of the neighborhoods and churches in this region remain segregated by race and social class.

Comments such as this one, "*I like diversity and learning about other people and other cultures. I feel like the more you know about others, the more well-rounded person you are*" expresses a perspective shared by many that at-risk children are exotic people who are to be studied. What concerned us about this comment was that without a method of critique, one that would situate our preservice teachers from the standpoint of the at-risk child, what perspectives would be learned looking through an cultural lens that is both affluent and white?

We were intrigued when we read this next response because the preservice teacher seemed to be aware that it will take work and understanding to confront her own biases:

*I think that I will have success as a teacher overcoming the obstacles of race, poverty, and academic background by getting to know the child and to understand the situation in which he lives. I understand that many children do not come from the best homes and are going to suffer academically and emotionally as a result. It is important for the teacher to learn about and understand the background and situation in which the child lives. I believe it will be hard to accept some cultures simply due to the vast differences in them and mainstream society.*

By showing our preservice teachers a method of critique is instrumental in removing the blinders so they could really see their students, they would be able to link the children's' life histories with what the curriculum requires to be taught. Once you know the child, then you can begin to link their life histories to academic assignments (Delpit, 1995).

Coming to understand the at-risk discourse in context of the racial and class divide in the area was summed up well by this comment, "Growing up in Georgia, differences and change are not things that are widely accepted".



### **Week Three - Discovering their unique talents.**

We designed the next question as a descriptive review to get to know the students on another level and to determine how to help STAR students who are struggling in school. The preservice teachers were encouraged to observe their child's physical presence and gestures as well as voice, attitude, learning style, creativity, conceptual tempo, etc. For this question, we relied on Rhoda Kavanisky's (1993 p. 157-8) work, *Descriptive review of a child: A way of knowing about teaching and learning*, as a tool to learn more about the STAR student.

The question for Week Three was:

*The focus for this week's question is on your child's physical and intellectual characteristics through a technique called the descriptive review. Many teachers use a descriptive review to figure out how to help a particular child who is struggling in school. Often done by a committee of teachers who advise the child's teacher, you can use the developmental review technique to learn more about your STAR. Please try your best to answer every question.*

*First, begin by observing your child's physical presence and gestures. How tall is your child in comparison to the other children? Is your child under or over weight? How would you describe the child's gestures and expressions? How visible are these gestures in the child's face, hands and body? Does your child freely express his/her emotions? Do these gestures change when the child is indoors or outdoors? How would you characterize the child's level of energy? How would you describe the child's rhythm and pace? How does it vary? How would you describe the child's voice (rhythm, expressiveness and inflection?)*

*The next step is to discuss how the child learns through direct instruction, what is called 'formal learning'. You may need to create situations where you can observe these characteristics. What is the child's attitude toward learning? How would you characterize the child as a thinker? Does the child use trial and error to figure things out? Can you give an example? How would you assess the child's ability to solve problems? Can you give an example? Does your child have an active and creative imagination? Can you give an example? Have you seen instances where the child uses reason and logic? Can you give an example? Does your child ever rely on intuition? Can you give an example? In what ways does your child express things through fantasy? What are the child's favorite subjects? What skills come easily? What tasks are difficult for the child? What is the child's conceptual tempo? Is the child quick to respond to questions or is s/he a reflective learner who takes time before answering? (Kavanisky, 1993 p. 157-158).*

When we looked at the descriptive reviews, the comments spanned the range of very helpful to not at all helpful. For some, the descriptive review was a useful tool in

assisting the teachers as they focused on their STAR students and their learning styles and preferences, yet others did not share the same sentiments:

*The review helped to structure my thinking about my child. Critically thinking about specific reactions to specific instances allows one to accumulate an overall psychological picture of a child.*

And-

*The developmental review did not change the way I think about my student. It made me think about her actions but did not help me select instructional strategies.*

#### **Week Four - Reflecting back.**

To find out if our students were making a transformation in their thinking about the at risk discourse, we asked the following question during week four:

*Let's use this week's reflection to consolidate what we have learned so far about your STAR student. During the week that preceded your first visit, most of you either made predictions about your new student or, for those of you who already had a STAR, described the child to us. Here is a question for you to reflect upon: If this is a new STAR, how accurate were your predictions regarding the child's home life, housing, social class, race etc.?*

Some of the reflections revealed a real pride in accuracy:

*My predictions regarding my STAR student were fairly accurate. My child is bi-racial and only lives with his mother, grandmother, sister, and hardly ever gets to see his father. He lives in a broken home and has worn the same outfit every time I have seen him.*

Although most of the preservice teachers were fairly accurate in their predictions that their child would be from a broken home, would struggle academically, and would be African-American, there were those who were not as accurate in their characterization of an "at-risk" child. It was interesting to note, however, that a few of the at-risk students were not of the expected racial background - as is expressed through the next two responses:

*My predictions of my STAR's home life were about 70% correct. He does live in a small apartment with a family low on income, but as for race and home life my predictions were faulty. He does have a family regularly active in his life, but their participation in his schooling is questionable.*

And-

*My student was the total opposite of what I had predicted. She is a 4<sup>th</sup> grade Caucasian girl who is at-risk because she does not receive attention at home from her father. Her*

*mother died two years ago and her father has not been the same. She lacks a motherly figure in her life.*

### **Week Five - Confronting the dominant at-risk discourse**

For question number five we took a few pages from Ruby Paynes' (2003, p. 76-80) book, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, to see if our students viewed their STAR student as did Payne. From our perspective, Paynes' book is a cookbook example of how to Other children who seem to be different than you. Widely used in school districts in the south with large African American populations, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* makes no apologies about stereotyping lower socioeconomic students as lacking middle class morals. Given that schools are dominated by white middle class values and practices, the way to help 'these people' is to know them through a lens of deficiency then show them how to behave as proper middle class children do. Because the district in which we did this study had trained their teachers with a workshop by Ruby Payne, we thought it would be interesting to find out if our preservice teachers shared Paynes' perspectives as well. We took some literary liberties on question five when we turned some of the declarative statements made by Payne (2003 p. 76-80) into questions for our students to reflect upon.

*For your fifth week reflection, we would like for you to think about a few of your student's characteristics. This week, focus your conversations and activities with your STAR and his/her teacher to find out:*

- 1. Is your student disorganized, frequently losing papers, doesn't get signatures on forms sent home etc.?*
- 2. Gives many reasons why a paper or an assignment is missing.*
- 3. Doesn't do homework.*
- 4. Is your child physically aggressive?*
- 5. Likes to show off or entertain others.*
- 6. Has trouble getting started on an assignment.*
- 7. Has trouble with self-discipline.*
- 8. Laughs when disciplined.*
- 9. Only works with people they like.*
- 10. Dislikes authority (teachers, principal).*

Overall, the preservice teachers' perceptions of their STAR students were not consistent with Payne's (2003) assertions of at-risk children. Less than four preservice teachers reported that their STAR was disorganized or had trouble with self-discipline. Only two preservice teachers found that their STARS gave excuses about why a paper or assignment was missing; did not do their homework or liked to show off. Only one child was identified as aggressive and one preferred only to work with people they like. None of the preservice teachers noticed their STARS laughing when disciplined or showed any

contempt toward authority figures. In our view, our preservice teachers have dispelled some of the stereotypes surrounding children who have been put at-risk.

### **Week Six - Attitudes of the classroom teacher**

As a way to find out how their students were chosen for the STARS program, question six required an interview of classroom teachers to determine what type of home support the STAR students received, and if the children knew why they were selected for the STARS program. We also wanted to determine if there were any deleterious effects of the at-risk label that had been put on the child. Question six was posed in the following way:

*For your sixth week reflection, we would like for you to interview your STAR student's teacher to find out: How was this student chosen for the STARS program? What needs (cognitive, emotional/social) does this student have? What type of home support does this student receive? How is this student perceived by his/her classmates? Is this student aware that he/she is "at risk" or why he/she meets with you weekly? If so, how?*

Answers from the classroom teachers regarding how the students were chosen for the STARS program included the following.

*"She needs all the help she can get; needs an adult figure in her life."*

*"She was chosen because of poor attendance, low achievement, and no support at home."*

*"He needed individual attention. His homelife was troubled."*

*"He was chosen mainly because of academic problems and needed a role model."*

*"She was chosen because she was behind academically and she just moved here."*

*"He is very quiet and just needs an extra someone to push him."*

*"She speaks little English and is far behind."*

*"He was chosen because of his reading difficulties."*

*"He was chosen because of his behavior; he talks too much during class."*

*"He was chosen because his basic literacy test scores were low."*

*"He was chosen because of academics and the need of a positive influence."*

*"Her parents had recently gone through a terrible divorce and she was having emotional and social struggles."*

*"He comes from a broken home."*

The STAR students' needs included emotional, cognitive, social, academic, reading skills, ADD, math skills, spelling skills, immaturity, and stability with emotional, social, and academic reasons being cited most often. Most of the students received little support from home, although one teacher did report that one of the student's mother was fantastic and helps out when needed. One student receives help from a grandparent, and some parents wanted to help but did not know how.

What we discovered is that most of the STAR students were not aware why they were chosen for this program with many having no inkling about the program at all. Some of the students said they knew they needed extra help in a particular subject, but none of them saw their participation in the program as a negative thing. Some of the students were glad to have a new buddy and were used to working with various volunteers from the school system.

### **Week Seven - Reflecting on your own.**

As we progressed to the seventh week, we wondered if we were encouraging our preservice teachers to form their own thoughts about the at-risk discourse. Eager to discover if the preservice teachers' reflections hinted at signs of transformation, we asked what has come to be known around our college's education department as the wild card question.

*WILD CARD!!!! For this week's reflection, you have the opportunity to reflect on whatever you wish to write about.*

Just as one would imagine, there was an abundance of personal voice in these reflections as evidenced in the following comments taken from the journals:

*I enjoy spending time with my student, and I would love to get to know her better but she has been absent half of the time.*

And-

*I honestly feel that a lot of what the teachers are doing with these students and the way they talk to them is what is harming them. The teacher is not supportive nor does she offer the student any feeling of success.*

And-

*During the time with my STAR student, I try to focus on him and stuff that he likes. I try not to pry into his home life because I feel that if I were an at risk child, this hour each week would be my sanctuary.*

And-

*My student is more open with me than I feel she is with her teacher. I feel like she reveals to me things that are going on in her life that she may not to anyone else. I am glad that I can be the person she confides in. She is a wonderful girl.*

### **Week Eight - What if.**

In week eight we challenged our preservice teachers to reflect upon the educative capital that they and their families could provide to a STAR student. Because we wanted them to think about the question in terms of class, race, language and economic resources, the question was coined in this way:

*Much of the published research has suggested that the label “children at risk” is really a struggle for power over how to define children, families, and communities who are poor, of color, and/or native speakers of language other than English. This is definition implies that at risk children are different than you. Now that you have come to know your child very well this semester and you have also come to know who you are in terms of social class and wealth, we ask this question: If your STAR student was your child or your brother or sister, what would your family do to help this child? Would your family accept this child as one of their own? If your family accepted this child and gave him or her everything they gave you, do you think that your STAR would be at risk? Would the resources available from your family be instrumental in overcoming the problem?*

In response to question eight, the preservice teachers reflected on how their families could help their STAR students, the resources they would provide, and the status of their students if they could be a part of their families. As expected, the preservice teachers were most ideological in their comments as they would gladly open their homes to these students and welcome them as a part of their families. In all responses, the preservice teachers believed that if their STAR student lived with their families, they would no longer be “at risk”. We were excited at this point to observe that our students had become fully aware that class and economic resources were integral for school success. Yet, our exuberance was tempered when we discovered that many of our students perceived the families of STAR students to be lacking competent parents. One student wrote, “If my student was given the things I had in life which were not material things, she would thrive in overcoming her problems. Being accepted and loved unconditionally are the attributes of success. She would be provided with quality family time, involvement in family activities, and a supportive environment.” What this student and many others seem to be imply is that the STAR students’ family life is deficient, while the preservice teacher’s family is superior.

### **Week Nine - Breaking down the barriers to success.**

Week nine was the time when we asked if the at-risk problem resided in the child, families and/or in the structure of schools. The preservice teachers were asked to go beyond their personal relationships with the STAR students and to reflect on a few recommendations that have been made to help “at risk” students. Drawing from Swadener’s (1995) work , Children and Families “at Promise”: Deconstructing the Discourse of Risk. (p. 17 – 50) we phrased the question as:

*Up until now, our questions have largely been focused on your personal relationship with your STAR student. This week we would like for you to think about ways that schools contribute to the problem and to reflect on a few recommendations that have been made to help these children. Some of the recommendations are:*

- 1. Stop labeling and blaming children and their families as being the "problems".*

2. *Involve parents in more powerful roles in schools.*
3. *Change the instruction to fit the child.*
4. *Group children not in grades such as first, second or third, but in mixed age groups*
5. *Make schools more nurturing and loving.*
6. *Rather than assess students with grades, rely on authentic assessments such as portfolios to evaluate performance.*
7. *Become more culturally sensitive and inclusive.*
8. *Promote literacy in the home.*
9. *No standardized testing of any kind during the primary years.*
10. *End the practice of flunking children. (Swadener, 1995)*

*Do you agree or disagree with these recommendations? Which ones do you like best or least? What recommendations can you add to this list?*

The majority of the students sought to *stop labeling and blaming children and their families as being “the problems”* and voiced concerns over teachers who continue to blame children and their families. They also believed that *parents should have more powerful roles in schools*, and while favoring *changing instruction to fit the child*, they were very concerned about finding time to individualize instruction for each student. Unfortunately, only two teachers supported *grouping children in mixed age groups*. The remainder of the students saw too many problems linked with mixed age groups such as cognitive, emotional, and social differences that might impede their effectiveness as teachers. Not surprisingly, the preservice teachers were in full agreement that the *schools should be more nurturing and loving* and that *schools need to become more culturally sensitive and inclusive*. By an overwhelming majority, the students were in full agreement on *promoting literacy in the home*; with this being the most favored recommendation of the ten.

The recommendation, *rather than assess students with grades, rely on authentic assessments such as portfolios to evaluate performance*, evoked a variety of responses from the preservice teachers with most of them wanting to use both forms of assessment. The preservice teachers split once again when it came to the recommendation, *no standardized testing of any kind during the primary years*, with approximately one half finding merit in the tests while the others opposed their use.

Although presented with a preponderance of research to the contrary in our teacher education program, almost all of the preservice teachers were not in favor of ending the practice of flunking children reasoning that promotion would hurt an unprepared child.

### **Week Ten -Are you transformed yet?**

Question ten was framed to discover if the preservice teachers changed their thinking in any way. Although we detected a transformation in some of our students, we were curious to see if the preservice teachers were conscious of any sort of

transformation toward a critical way of thinking about the at-risk discourse. Question ten was posed as:

*Did the assigned questions help you get to know your STAR student better? If so, how? Did the questions assist you in understanding the structural aspects of being “at risk”? If so, which ones and how? How has your participation influenced your view of teaching “at-risk students”? What was most helpful about this process? What was least helpful about this process?*

Upon an analysis of the preservice teachers' comments in response to the usefulness of the weekly questions as related to getting to know the students and the structural aspects of being at risk, only three did not feel that the questions were beneficial. In response to how the preservice teachers' participation influenced their view of teaching “at risk” students, the comments were very favorable as well. Although nearly all responded that the questions were helpful, there were two students who found the process confining and doctrinaire. From our perspective, it is doubtful that our questions and assignments will be the catalyst for any activism, at the same time, we did find a glimmer of instances where the process may have had a personal transformational affect on our students in some degree. Through the interaction with the children, many of the preservice teachers made comments that alluded to a personal transformation of sorts; such as being given the honor of being part of the student's life.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

From our perspective about our preservice teachers, we believe that, overall, our semester long intervention confirms Johnson's (2001) assertion that a single intervention will most likely not result in substantial changes in a preservice teachers' worldview. Although there were moments when transformation was detected in a particular student, the next week's reflection from the very same student seemed to contradict her last reflection. Did our early childhood preservice educators begin to question the underlying assumptions about the at-risk discourse? Yes, at times, although it appeared that some students were telling us what we wanted to hear, while others seemed to be purposefully resisting our attempts to transform their thinking. Did our early childhood preservice educators begin to view this discourse in terms of power relations through a political lens? There was scant evidence of such thinking. Through our exposure of inequities in social structures, did our early childhood preservice educators offer solutions to end the oppression? Yes, as evidenced in some responses there appeared to be an effort to try to resolve this social issue with creative ideas. Are we confident that our questions, intended to expose of injustices embedded in the at-risk discourse, will lead to political action? No, we are not confident, or encouraged, that this one semester intervention had much impact with regard to political activism on our early childhood preservice educators.

Although our preservice teachers did not demonstrate much of a political transformation, we believe the process was successful as a reflective teaching exercise. Using Zeichner and Liston's (1996) work as a measure, our preservice teachers became



more aware of how to examine classroom practice and learned how to recognize the assumptions and values they will bring to teaching. We also believe that our students are now more alert to the institutional and cultural implications of teaching. But, whether or not they will become activists for curriculum change or seek profession development opportunities to learn more about the at-risk discourse in the future is unclear.

As researchers, who also participated in this study, we feel that our attempt to bring about a change in our students' thinking has had a significant effect on us as teacher educators. For us, a transformation surely happened. The action that we plan to take is to continue asking questions of our students every semester as they work with children "at-promise" throughout their program of study at our college.

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